

CHAPPELL SAYS TREAT CRITICS LIKE BUBBLE GUM

September 7, 2011 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article)

The latest slightly disguised onslaught against godly reproof of fundamental Baptist error is from the pen of Paul Chappell, pastor of Lancaster Baptist Church, Lancaster, California.

In a blog entitled “Questions to Ask When Criticized,” August 8, 2011, Chappell advises that God’s people treat “critics” like “bubble gum.” More about that at the end of this article.

Chappell offers a list of 33 questions that should be asked when deciding how to receive “criticism.”

Now, we know that it is wise to weigh criticism. I have no doubt that I have far more critics and receive far more criticism than most preachers do, and some of it I take more seriously than others. And, sure, we tend to take heed to criticism from a source of sterling repute and from someone we know personally more quickly than from one who is less reputable or from a stranger, but the proper test of criticism is not to ask dozens of questions about the critic and his motives. The proper test is whether the critic is speaking the truth. Even if the critic is Balaam or Balaam’s ass, if he is speaking the truth I need to take heed. Period.

Let me say at the outset that when I refer to “criticism” I am referring to godly, Bible-based reproof and correction. I have no sympathy for criticism based on mere opinion or human tradition or slanderous criticism or criticism that is issued from a carnal desire to hurt someone. The Bible emphasizes the importance of the ministry of reproof. The terms “reprove, reproof, rebuke, exhort” are found nearly 60 times in the New Testament. We are to “reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:2). The God-called preacher is to speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority” (Titus 2:15). We are to exhort one another daily (Hebrews 3:13) and to exhort one another even more as we see the day approaching (Hebrews 10:25).

God being my witness, I testify that this is the type of ministry I believe in and seek to exercise under God’s authority and by His grace and in accordance with His calling on my life as an ordained preacher. I will not be dismissed lightly as a mere “critic.” The IBaptist “good old boys” network will not have the final word. Christ will have the final word about these things at His judgment seat.

Pastor Chappell begins well and on solid scriptural ground with the wise words that “constructive criticism is an incredible asset,” and his first three points are biblically sound, as follows:

1. Is there truth in this criticism from which I can learn?
2. Is my rejection of this criticism due to pride in my heart?
3. Am I recognizing that even unkind or untrue criticism is often a tool of God to form my heart for Him?

He also rightly states that “destructive criticism can be incredibly damaging to the work of God.” I have personally been the object of a vast amount of destructive criticism, even by some men aligned with Brother Chappell, in fact. One man who teaches at West Coast was running around slandering my grown son with a complete and vicious lie. I am glad to say that when confronted he apologized, but he also said that he had heard that slander from other men. This is cheap gossip and it is very destructive to the cause of Christ. As a church planter since 1979, I have seen a lot of destructive criticism on the part of church members. Pastor Chappell does well to warn about this, and each of us will do well if we keep ourselves from gossip and every form of destructive criticism. As I have already stated, I have no sympathy with this type of thing, and when I have made a mistake in judgment or fact, I have been quick to retract it.

What I am fighting for is the scriptural right and responsibility to issue godly reproof and correction.

If Bro. Chappell had stopped here and included perhaps two or three of his other points, he would have done a great service to the cause of Christ within the fundamental Baptist movement. Sadly, though, by the end of the blog it becomes obvious that he only receives “criticism” after making the “critic” jump successfully through more than two dozen stringent hoops, and he is advising that the many preachers on his mailing list follow his pattern.

And it is obvious that he has a burr in his saddle in regard to certain critics of late!

There are five errors intermingled with truth in this blog.

And this is no light matter. I am convinced that these are some of the errors that resulted in the spiritual downfall (toward New Evangelicalism, “Christian rock, and beyond) of Highland Park Baptist Church in Chattanooga and Tennessee Temple and the Southwide Baptist Fellowship. (See *The Path from Independent Baptist to The Shack, Rome, and Beyond*, available as a free download at the Way of Life web site.)

If ever there were a time for godly public reproof of error committed by fundamental Baptist preachers and leaders, it is today, when the movement is being leavened by a wide assortment of heresies and compromises; but what we have is a definite and purposeful circling of the wagons against “criticism” on the part of the most influential leaders and their supporters.

ERROR # 1 -- REPROOF MUST ALWAYS BE PRIVATE.

The bottom line is that Bro. Chappell pretty much does not allow criticism unless it is private. He says, “Has the critic come to me personally (biblically) with this issue? If not, the criticism is being handled in a carnal way.”

This is to lump every type of reproof and rebuke and godly correction into the category of a Matthew 18 issue, which is a gross scriptural error. (See “Why Don’t You Follow Matthew 18?” at the Way of Life web site.)

Matthew 18 deals with personal trespasses between members of an assembly. Consider exactly what the passage says:

“Moreover if thy brother SHALL TRESPASS AGAINST THEE, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, TELL IT UNTO THE CHURCH: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican” (Matthew 18:15-17).

When I warn about a church and school that is adopting Contemporary Christian Music or some other error, that is not a private matter and I am under no constraint to following Matthew 18.

The command for a preacher to reprove, rebuke, and exhort and to earnestly contend for the faith (2 Timothy 4:2; Jude 3) is not limited to private situations and has nothing to do with the situation in Matthew 18. The prophets of old did not have to first go to the nation’s rulers or to the compromising prophets before reproving them publicly. There is no evidence that John the Baptist first talked with Herod before condemning his adultery.

In fact, Pastor Chappell gives himself and those on his staff and visiting preachers the liberty to warn about *some men* by name without first having gone to them privately. A West Coast graduate recently wrote to inform me that West Coast does believe in naming names, and he mentioned Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, Rob Bell, and Bill Hybels in particular, as men who have been mentioned by name in recent days at Lancaster Baptist.

Is it not hypocritical for a man to say that I must first go to a Baptist leader before I can properly warn about his compromise, when that man abrogates to himself the right to warn about New Evangelicals and Modernists and Emergents and Christian rockers without first going to them?

ERROR # 2 -- THOSE WHO WIN SOULS DON’T CRITICIZE.

Pastor Chappell offers the following statement in one of his questions to ask about critics:

“When people devote themselves to doing good and winning souls, they don’t have time to criticize.”

This is pure, ridiculous Jack Hylesism.

First of all, it is contrary to what Pastor Chappell said in the beginning of his own blog and in the first three points, where he says that “criticism” can be a good and helpful thing and that he has benefited by it at times.

Second, Paul was a soul winner but he had plenty of time to “criticize” sin and error and compromise. He did that in nearly every one of his epistles. In 1 and 2 Timothy he criticized heretics and compromisers by name 10 times. He criticized Demas for loving the world and Alexander the Coppersmith for doing him harm and Hymenaeus and Philetus for spiritualizing the resurrection.

ERROR # 3 -- THE AUTONOMY OF THE CHURCH MEANS THE CHURCH CANNOT BE CRITICIZED BY OUTSIDERS.

Pastor Chappell’s question # 25 is as follows:

“Is the critic claiming to be a Baptist but failing to respect the doctrine of the ‘autonomy of the local church’? Is he attempting to influence other flocks while not helping to build one in the context of winning and discipling people?”

Again, Chappell is not consistent in this. He has teachers and men on staff and men who come in for preacher’s conferences who “criticize” Saddleback Church and Willowcreek and other churches without stopping to worry about “respecting the autonomy of the local church.”

Further, he himself has a large and very public ministry that reaches far beyond his own church and influences thousands of believers who are not his members of his church.

It is for this very reason that a ministry like Paul Chappell’s should be critiqued publicly and not privately, for the sake of those they are influencing.

Take his recent blog, for example. That is not a mere sermon he preached to his own congregation. It is a public blog intended for viewing by people all over the world in countless churches. For other preachers to critique it publicly is the right and scriptural way to deal with such a thing.

By the way, I have been a fruitful church planter since 1979 and a church leader and discipler since 1975, so I qualify to “criticize” according to Bro. Chappell’s own standards (except that I refuse to play the “private only” game).

ERROR # 4 -- FOR CRITICISM TO BE MOST VALID, THE CRITIC MUST KNOW ME PERSONALLY.

Pastor Chappell suggests that we ask the following question in regard to critics:

“Does the critic know me or my family? Have we ever prayed together or gone soulwinning together? The less the relationship, the less valid the opinion or judgment.”

This cannot be defended from Scripture. John the Baptist didn't know Herod. The prophet Amos didn't know Jeroboam and had never even been a visitor in the palace. If a man is preaching the truth and reproof according to Scripture on the basis of a true judgment of a life and ministry, he is right regardless of whether he personally knows those he reproves.

Again, Pastor Chappell is not consistent here. He has allowed “criticism” of Rob Bell and Rick Warren and Bill Hybels and some CCM artists, etc., and neither he nor those doing the reproof in West Coast classrooms or Lancaster's pulpit know these men personally. Would he say that the reproof of such men has any less validity because of this?

The bottom line is that some fundamental Baptist preachers think they are out of bounds for criticism except perhaps in a private context by personal friends.

ERROR # 5 -- I MUST KNOW THE HEART MOTIVE OF A CRITIC BEFORE HEEDING HIM.

Many of the 33 points Pastor Chappell lists would require that you know the heart's motive and even psychological condition of the "critic," which of course is impossible. Consider the following questions that Chappell suggests asking when considering critics:

“Is the critic seeking to build a following or gain attention for fleshly purposes by generally being negative about people who are more known than he is?”

“Is the critic attempting to build a following by a dramatic and divisive assertion of his opinions?”

“Has the critic suffered in his life through a relationship with an angry, absent, or abusive father? If so, he may be crying out for attention and trying to prove himself in a fleshly manner.”

“Does the critic assume that his past affiliation with a known church or college validates him as an expert?”

“Has the critic assumed the position of ‘watchdog at large’ over Christianity?”

“Does the critic seem to hope for my response or reaction?”

How could you possibly know if such things were true? You can suspect what the heart motive of another man might be, but only God knows the heart.

If we must ponder such questions before heeding biblical reproof, then the reproof will rarely be effective.

And I am convinced that is the real point of the blog. In spite of some right-sounding statements about the importance of reproof, the blog is largely a warning against reproof. Certainly it can be no coincidence that Chappell is stating almost the exact sentiment expressed recently by R.B. Oulette in his “Chasing Buzzard” blog. Both create a mythical “watchdog at large” (Chappell’s term) or “Inspector General of Fundamentalism” (Oulette’s term) as a straw man to pummel. (See “Oulette’s Take on Buzzard Chasing” at the Way of Life web site.)

In practice, Pastor Chappell can be reproofed only on his terms, which is privately, and he is therefore free to treat his “critics” as “carnal” or psychological maladapted or joyless and is at liberty to influence multitudes beyond the doors of his church with no “allowable” mechanism whereby other preachers can warn about his compromise.

What he has done by publishing such an incredibly lengthy list of questions is effectively to mark “critics” as harmful to the cause of Christ. This attitude will prove destructive to West Coast and its many followers just as it was to Tennessee Temple.

Chappell’s true attitude toward reproof is evident from the last sentence of his blog:

“I REMIND YOU TO TREAT CRITICISM LIKE BUBBLE GUM. CHEW ON IT A LITTLE, AND THEN SPIT IT OUT.”

That’s pretty much what the Jews of old did in regard to their critics, the prophets, and it is how New Evangelicals treat their fundamentalist critics.

This philosophy is one of the most destructive things within the IBaptist movement of which I have been a part for nearly 40 years.

My friends in Christ, do not buy into these errors. That the majority of fundamental Baptists seem to have drank this Kool-Aid does not make it right. Nothing that is unscriptural is right, regardless of who recommends it, and nothing that is unscriptural is spiritually safe.

At the same time, let us strive to be kind and gracious and wise in all of our dealings. We should never issue reproof in a light matter. We must always consider ourselves first, because we are sinners and are liable to error and self-deception (Jeremiah 17:9; Galatians 6:1).

Further, we must always show proper honor to preachers and give them the benefit of the doubt. I have discussed this in many articles and sermons, including “Seven Keys for Fruitful Church Membership” and “I Am Not Your Pastor.”

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